

Information Operations: The Challenges of Second Generation Insurgencies

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Editorial Abstract: In this first in a series, the author explores the role of IO when faced by second generation insurgencies capable of mounting their own sophisticated information operations. Such groups target specific audiences with articulate, simple and ideologically grounded messages aimed at specific vulnerable groups, against a backdrop of a pervasive global media. He concludes we have to develop a strategic-through-tactical IO approach that seeks to complement and reinforce tactical arena operations, highlighting inconsistencies in insurgent leader's messages.

Backdrop

Recent media coverage suggests there is a growing body of analysis and commentary indicating the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have fuelled the Global War of Terror (GWOT). They have, it is suggested, provided a magnet for disenchanted people from the Muslim world, drawing them into these theatres to undertake Jihad¹ in the cause of building a reinvigorated [and hence more collective] world-wide Muslim community or Umma.

These perspectives need to be seen against the backdrop of a globalized world, where traditional state boundaries and allegiances have broken down—where the 1.2 billion Muslims are increasingly viewed as a trans-national community—from a media perspective if nothing else. It is possible to argue to some extent the Umma has been re-created, if we view it as an audience which might be receptive to certain messages. Albeit, it does not represent a single governed state with adherence to Sharia Law. In addressing ourselves to the challenges of conducting information operations against this backdrop, we must take into account both this audience and our approach to message delivery, with greater care than has hitherto been the case. The West must orchestrate tactical level measures from an overall strategically derived and maintained campaign.

In contrast to the initial proposition in this article, it is also true to say there are those whose assessment differs—they argue that the levels of violence we see in these theatres would be happening



*Greater challenges lie just ahead.
(Defense Link)*

anyway, but its nexus (if indeed one were to exist) would be elsewhere. After all, they point out, a number of those leading the Jihadist movement (the Global Salafist Jihad—GSJ) have been waging varying forms of warfare and terrorism well before September 11th, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Such a view merits further analysis. To determine what strategy the West should adopt to defeat Al-Qaeda, we must first look at Al-Qaeda's strategy against the US and its Allies. It is possible to do this by listening to what they say, viewing the US through their eyes, and by watching what they do. Listening to what Al-Qaeda say draws three lessons from Osama bin Laden's supposed declaration, captured in the World Islamic Front Statement of February 1998.²

The first concerns the Arab/Israeli problem: Al-Qaeda (AQ) is gaining leverage for the extremists from the perception that the US is failing to resolve the dispute. AQ claims the influence of the American Jewish people prevents a fog-free and unbiased view of the situation. Resolving this issue is a work of significance in its own right.

Bin Laden's declaration reads that "... the aim is also to serve the Jew's petty state and divert attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there." Secondly, Al-Qaeda want US influence out of Iraq and they pronounce that, "... despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the crusader-Zionist alliance, and despite the huge number of those killed, which has exceeded 1 million ... despite all this, the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres."

Thirdly and in more general terms, Al-Qaeda desires the removal of US influence (value projection²) from Islam. Their assertion refers to "the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate... the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam." Al-Qaeda would wish for a resolution of the Arab/Israeli dispute, US influence out of Iraq and, in general, out of Islam.

It is also worth remembering the media capital made by GSJ and their colleagues in various related movements, with the withdrawal of US and French troops from the Lebanon after the car

bomb attacks as being a major victory. This also has to be set against the backdrop of their victory over the Soviet Union, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR and its hegemony over its satellite states. GSJ desires a similar effect for NATO forces in Afghanistan. Recent Hezbollah operations in Lebanon have similarly created a feeling that a major (if not the) military power in the region has been defeated by clever use of asymmetric approaches to warfare.

In these positions we find the classic polarized elements that often provide the backdrop to an information operations campaign. Two juxtapositions at what are clearly very different ends of a spectrum of views—often quite distinct in messages they are passing to audiences and easily reinforced—through unintended outcomes, such as the use of the media to portray the persecution of prisoners. But set against a world where the 24 by 7 global media is capable of reaching specific communities or groups and quickly unleashing violent responses—the response to the recent speech in Germany by the Pope being one case in point and the other being the impact of the Danish [Prophet Mohammed] Cartoons. Moreover, we also have to recognize that media coverage, with its challenges of filling 24 by 7 airtime, is often repetitive and shallow in its analysis [often basing key points on sound bites]. Mass media are attempting to get often complex messages across to audiences that sometimes have lower levels of literacy, and who readily see certain events or actions as an attack upon their established way of life.

The issue therefore is how do we position an information operations campaign, set against an increasingly globalized media and a sophisticated, technically aware, ideologically motivated and articulate adversary? How do we counter his clearly defined simple messages [able to be readily delivered as sound bites] that are aimed at a specific and vulnerable community?

A Question of an Information Operations Strategy

Today we are faced by—what in this article we shall refer to as a *second-generation asymmetric insurgency*—that is backed up by a sophisticated GSJ and related group media operation, that reinforces a number of simple, and yet key messages. These include the need to do duty through Jihad⁵ to fight the aggression from the Zionists and Christians that are targeting Islam and setting this in the context of some periods of world history—such as the time when the Mongols sacked Baghdad in the 13th century and ended the Abbasid [747-1258] Caliphate.

This world-wide enemy with no respect for international boundaries and



Sharing many messages. (Defense Link) norms, coupled with a highly developed and developing well articulated message sets, delivers to a sympathetic audience. The messages, being broadcast through the Internet and across traditional media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, reach empathetic eyes and ears.

Indeed, what might be seen as an asymmetric fight in terms of military levels of capability—where the West has more resources—is reversed when it comes to media aspects. It is clearly the case that the GSJ movement and its various associated organizations are presently far more capable when it comes to media operations than we in the West.⁶ Their ability to conduct influence operations is far more agile and flexible than we have at the moment—a

capability that we certainly had in the Cold War and during the Vietnam War.⁷

So is it right to suggest that terrorist activities would be in any way different had we not deployed forces into Iraq and Afghanistan? Some would argue that had we not removed the Taliban regime from Kabul, the GWOT might be a lot worse than it is today—as the training camps in Afghanistan would have continued to turn out recruits for the GSJ movement. This cadre of willing volunteers would have been motivated enough—through their training in the camps—to have wished to carry out operations in support the drive towards creation of the new Caliphate.

One of the key issues at the heart of this is *where* they might do that? Some would focus on the so-called near-enemy—states in the Middle East that have been seen to be too close to the West—Jordan and Egypt, for example. Others would advocate operations in the West—the US and Europe—plus world-wide attacks such as those carried out in Bali, and planned attacks in Singapore. The fact is that those who desire to recreate the global Muslim community are engaged in what can only be called the long-game—a desire to carry out terrorist operations on an on-going basis until they achieve the goal of a

trans-national state—from Spain to the Philippines—that is governed on the basis of Sharia law. This is something they regard as being non-negotiable, placing us in the West in a difficult position of how to cope with their aims and long-term strategy, and the messages they deliver to their target audience.

To provide a concerted response to this new environment, we simply have to try and understand the way in which our adversaries conduct their approach to information operations and their objectives. At the heart of GSJ's strategy is the desire to mobilise the world-wide Muslim population to overthrow secular governments. Their objective is to build upon feelings of resentment that exist

over issues such as Palestine, as well as what they perceive—thanks to excellent information operations orchestrated by Al-Qaeda amongst others—to be the West’s global crusade against Islam.

Our challenge is not to pour further fuel upon this fire by carrying out actions that would ultimately be used against us in the court of world opinion, and more specifically that part of it to which the 1.2 billion Muslims world-wide belong. The question is how do we create a clear, orchestrated view of our objectives in the world that are compatible with the vast majority of the Muslim population. We must reduce the numbers of people who feel their only course of action is to join the ranks of the Jihad, and undertake worldwide terror attacks. Moreover, in developing our approach we also need to ask to what extent we are providing escape routes from this trajectory, from passive acknowledgement of grievances, through radicalization into violent responses, such as suicide bombings.

Further articles in this series will consider such issues, and highlight the inherent problems that exist in a free society when getting the messages across to those who may be prepared to hear—but not listen to—the arguments. This article suggests that we in the West are currently poor at getting our messages across, not only to our own populations—a point that seems to be backed up in opinion polls—as well as to populations overseas.⁸ It suggests that we need to have greater connectivity between the strategic messages we are delivering, and the tactical operations on the ground. Given the level of Western military efforts directed at the Balkans, humanitarian operations like the Tsunami relief work, and efforts after the earthquake in Pakistan, it is surprising we have apparently not received acknowledgement for assisting primarily Muslim populations when they have been vulnerable.

How can we address this? Today there is a wide ranging debate within military and political circles about the move towards conducting what might be referred to as effects based operations

(EBO)—in other words not only using kinetic effects to achieve orchestrated military aims—coordinated across the spectrum of instruments available to Western governments.

It is clear that over recent operations a paradigm shift is occurring in the way in which we develop our planning of military operations. This article maintains that whilst there is a major shift in our approach to military operations, there has not yet been an associated development of the way in which we conduct IO alongside the military activities. This is an area we urgently need to address. One aspect of this may be to undertake activities in the information operations space that carefully highlights inconsistencies in GSJ message—ignoring as they do the 14 centuries of Islamic Jurisprudence. We should also be agile enough to exploit, perhaps at the tactical level,

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opportunities that arise to highlight divisions and schisms that appear in our adversaries’ views.

On a recent visit to Iraq, I was struck by the emphasis being placed on the successful harvesting of the winter tomato crop. This delivery was one of a number of things that were uppermost in the local commander’s mind. Clearly, successful delivery of the tomato crop was vitally important to the local population. Equally, maintaining southern Iraq’s oil export supply, something to which a great deal of military effort is dedicated on land, air and sea, is a key element of developing the local economy. Such successes rarely get media coverage. Their voracious appetite for bad news, already highlighted in this thesis as a matter of minutes at very shallow depth, far outweigh the air time allocated to success stories.

In understanding there are indeed paradigm shifts in the way we conduct warfare, such as the evolution of the three-block war, we have to remember

that warfare is all about influencing an adversaries will to continue fighting. They want to prolong their activities in the hope they can achieve their end game and objectives. This ability to influence their will is where psychology may offer some insights into coordinated IO strategy development. This will be the subject of a follow-on companion article that will look at ways in which information operations can benefit from studies such as Carl Jung’s work on *Psychological Types*.⁹

Information Operations and Second Generation Insurgency

History shows that insurgencies are classically fought using what are often called *hearts and minds* approaches. The United Kingdom military had a number of successful campaigns, carried out in Malaya and Oman, whereby delivering water supplies, medicine, fuel and other materials to communities supporting the insurgency helped our forces obtain intelligence and gain leverage.

Such efforts enabled careful operational planning, to have maximum effect upon adversaries’ supply lines and means of support in the local area. This targets the adversaries’ will by showing him that you have excellent knowledge of his activities, and can choose to act at places of your choosing. Further, this undermines support and ultimately reduces his will to prosecute the campaign.

There is no doubt that local efforts to ensure a steady supply of basic utilities and food are essential elements of an overall tactical level campaign plan to win hearts and minds. Whether these lower level successes are fully exploited at the operational level is a question we could usefully debate. Clear examples of such linkage are not immediately and readily apparent—which from an information operations perspective is troubling. However it is also clear that at the strategic level we are failing to get campaign aims and objectives across to our intended audiences. But in an age of globalization, where access to the

Internet and media is straightforward, a whole new challenge arises.

This is what we shall refer to as *second generation asymmetric warfare*—the first generation being conducted by UK forces in Malaya, Oman and, to some extent, Northern Ireland, from the 1950s through the 1980s.¹⁰ This first generation of asymmetric warfare was conducted far away from the media spotlight; little was known of the campaigns or their successes or failures. The role of UK Special Forces in places like Oman was not acknowledged publicly. Operations were conducted on the ground with specific local aims and objectives, in effect pushing back the boundaries of where the adversary felt able to operate. Coupled with excellent use of physical maneuver space, UK forces conducted these local effects in territory where the adversary would have felt relatively safe—and thus sought to undermine the will to fight. The adversary could not predict where UK forces would operate next.

A key aspect of the first generation asymmetric conflicts was the use of locally derived, often human intelligence (HUMINT)-based, information on the adversaries' supply routes and organization. Intelligence collected on the ground, coupled with careful military planning and harnessing of limited forces, allowed forces to deliver the maximum effect against the will of the adversary. In this era, an enemy denied the oxygen of publicity that is available today, would lose ground in the maneuver space—through lack of support—and ultimately be defeated.

Information Operations in the Cognitive Space

It is also true that people can lose the war in the cognitive space—something for which we aim in information operations. Let us take the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Evidence in the open media suggests that Zarqawi had lost his constituency, and was increasingly coming into conflict with the Al-Qaeda leadership. Many saw his efforts to create the circumstances



Fighting next generation insurgencies. (Defense Link)

where a civil war was unleashed in Iraq as over zealous. It is fair to say that many people thought he had lost the plot, and was prepared to go for ever more desperate measures to try and incite violence in Iraq. It is also true that whilst at his peak of his activities he was by far the main attraction for those prepared to fund his organizations operations—drawing funds away from Al-Qaeda's main leadership. Some of his actions also produced a backlash.

The bombing of the hotels in Jordan served to disassociate his activities from a large number of supportive people; he was seen to be going too far. This led to him lose the hearts and minds—the cognitive maneuver space—of many of his erstwhile supporters—which led to his reported betrayal. It was his actions, and dedication to fostering a civil war by any means possible, that led to his demise. Successful military campaigns cannot rely on the other guy losing the plot and effectively shooting himself in the foot—although when it happens (possibly as an unintended consequence of his actions) it is nevertheless welcome. Further, we should recognize this as a decisive point—a point at which the adversaries' center of gravity [in this regard in this article, his ideology] can be threatened. If—and only if—we have the agility within our force structures and approaches, can we take advantage of such an event.

In the absence of such pieces of luck, it is important we bring a more effective approach to information operations, designed to help us achieve overall military effects, and resorting to kinetic measures when this is seen as the right and proportionate response. At the heart of this is the issue of addressing the need to provide a seamless view of our messages and to ensure they have the right impact, plus build a willingness to listen to our points of view. Above all, in creating this seamless view we need to build empathy for the messages we wish to be heard.

This is extremely difficult when set against a backdrop of on-going military operations, with all their potential for casualties and associated media coverage at both the operational and tactical levels [noting impact in a region or country] and the strategic level—across the global media. The speed with which public antipathy can be further enhanced, given the media coverage, has been illustrated several times in the last few years, such as the reactions to the Danish [Prophet Mohammed] cartoons—which had been published earlier with little or no media coverage. It was only through the direct actions of those seeking to dominate the media agenda that the coverage became global, with its consequent loss of life.

This failure of connectivity between the successes at the tactical level, and the ability to exploit those at the operational

and strategic levels, is ultimately one of the reasons why commentaries suggest the GWOT has worsened the overall security situation in the world, not acted to stabilize it. Until we resolve the need to establish a coordinated information operations campaign across all instruments of power (political, economic and military), and ensure this works top-to-bottom across the entire spectrum of our activities, we will not secure the progress we need in building a consensus to secure the end of terrorism.

In attempting to develop a coordinated strategic-to-tactical approach to information operations, it is clear we must understand the way our adversaries are delivering their messages to what they have decided is their target audience. At this moment our adversaries are very good at operating in cognitive maneuver space—in contrast to physical maneuver space.

This is not to suggest that those involved in the insurgency are not good at that physical dimension—far from it. They are experts and using the ground around them to fight. It is just that what we are dealing with here is a second generation of insurgency. Recognizing the “ground” on which we have to fight this war for the hearts and minds of the world-wide Muslim population is vital. Developing sound and robust approaches to how we fight in the cognitive space is as important to us today as it was fifty years ago in Malaya. The issue is how do we do that against a second generation insurgency with all the implications of 24 by 7 media coverage? It is to this question, and the related topic of how we need to direct intelligence collection to take that fight to our adversaries, that we shall return in the second part of this article.

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Notes

¹(2005) Cook, David – *Understanding Jihad*, University of California Press

² Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, World Islamic Front Statement, 23 February 1998 at <http://ndunet.ndu.edu/nduspeeches/OsamahBin-MuhammadBin-Ladin.htm> accessed on 1 Dec 03.

³ US National Interests are freedom, democracy, and free enterprise according to the Bush September 2002 *National Security Strategy*. National Interests, within this article, are expressed in terms of the four categories of security, prosperity, value projection, and value preservation as within the Deibel Model accessed, with notes, from <http://ndunet.ndu.edu/nwc/FASmodel/fas.htm> on 10 Oct 03.

⁴ This is a task for a separate article. This article posits that a balanced solution to the Arab/Israeli problem would be enough to satisfy Al-Qaeda. Alternatively, it could also be argued that Al-Qaeda wish the Israeli Jews to be “pushed into the sea” and care not for any form of negotiated settlement. I believe

the issue for Al-Qaeda is the perception of how the US has been approaching a solution to the problem.

⁵ It is interesting to note that the word “Jihad” appears once in the Koran. The most frequently used word is “ilm” or “knowledge.”

⁶ I am grateful for the conversations with Wing Commander Neil Martin in respect of this remark.

⁷ I am grateful to Brian Jenkins of RAND Corporation for making this remark in response to a recent International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) presentation ‘Where we are with the GWOT.’

⁸ This is based upon recent UK press coverage suggesting that nearly 100,000 people in the UK have some affinity with Suicide Terrorism, noting the attacks in London of July 2007.

⁹ (1999) Hall, C.S, Nordby V.J. *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*, Meridian Publications.

¹⁰ It is fair to say that operations in Northern Ireland took place against an ever increasingly capable global media footprint and development of the Internet. So it can be argued that this was the first Insurgency of the second-generation. 